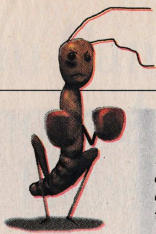


A LOOK AT...

The Year's Weirdest News



By CHUCK SHEPHERD

On the Homefront

LESSER OF EVILS IN THE HEARTLAND: Eight farmers in the town of Nemaha, Iowa, (pop. 112) have taught themselves to perform various square-dancing routines while seated on vintage Farmall tractors, maneuvering the vehicles to do-si-do and promenade. In keeping with tradition, which requires four "couples" to complete the "square," four of the male dancers operate their tractors dressed in female garb—gingham dresses, wigs and white gloves—designed by their wives and girlfriends.

—Successful Farming, May 1; San Francisco Chronicle, June 26

ENCOURAGING NEWS FROM THE ACADEMY: The University of Surrey in Britain beefed up the curriculum at its school of management studies by appointing the world's first professor of airline food and adding graduate-level courses in the study of in-flight catering. The professorship is being established through a \$500,000 grant from the International Flight Catering Association. David Arey, head of the management school, said: "There is certainly enough potential in it to do a doctorate of philosophy."

—The Guardian, Oct. 3

REAL MEN EAT CHEESE: A dispatch from Nuoro, Sardinia, described the locals' love for *casu marzu* ("rotten cheese"): brown lumps made from sheep's milk crawling with wriggling maggots (the larvae of flies), whose enzymes cause the original pecorino cheese to decompose into a "viscous, pungent goo that burns the tongue." Though the delicacy is banned by the government, the black market has pushed the price to more than \$7 a pound, double that for worm-free pecorino. Local gourmands disdainfully dismiss any portions that are so stale that the maggots in them have died.

—Wall Street Journal, Aug. 23

FAMILY VALUES 101: Brigham Young University students organized a Fight Club, inspired by the Brad Pitt movie. Until the club disbanded under pressure from unhappy university officials, the matches drew as many as 300 cheering spectators to a Provo, Utah, warehouse. Unlike the bare-knuckled fights in the film, the BYU matches featured boxers who wore gloves and pounded each other for three 45-second rounds. The brawls were held late enough in the evening so as not to violate the Mormon "family home evening" concept. (Fighting is not against the BYU Honor Code, but watching the R-rated "Fight Club" movie is.)

—Deseret News, April 12; Salt Lake Tribune, April 19 and April 26

THE FUTURE OF WARFARE, ONE HOPES: The Philippine national mania for wireless text messaging now has a military application: Muslim guerrillas at war with government troops in the southern islands are firing off electronic insults to army cell phones. How do the guerrillas know the numbers? From the memory files of cell phones captured from Filipino soldiers, who brought them to the front so they could stay in touch with their families.

—New York Times, July 5

Left Out of the Olympics

THE FOOD NETWORK WANTS THE RIGHTS: College student Laura

McCoy became a hot food-company prospect by leading her Mississippi State University team to dairy-sniffing victory in the annual Milk Bowl. She won the "ice cream" category (by coming closest to the opinion of professional judges on smell, taste and texture), took seconds in "cheddar" and "yogurt," placed third in "cottage cheese" and "milk," and fifth in "butter."

—Wall Street Journal, Feb. 8

WHY THERE'S DRUG TESTING: Japan's Kazutoyo "The Rabbit" Arai (who weighs 101 pounds) beat defending champ Steve Keiner (400 pounds) in the annual Nathan's international hot dog-eating championship at New York's Coney Island on July 4, gobbling down 25 dogs—and buns—in 12 minutes, to Keiner's 16.

—New York Post, July 5

TERMINEX IS NOT A SPONSOR: The annual Chinese national cricket-fight tournament, an insect contest once favored by emperors but now dominated by hard-core gamblers, was held in Beijing after another stellar recruiting season in Shandong province. Cricket farmers in that region of eastern China search their fields for the insects with the physique and character to endure the tough matches inside eight-inch-wide plastic containers.

—New York Times, Oct. 4

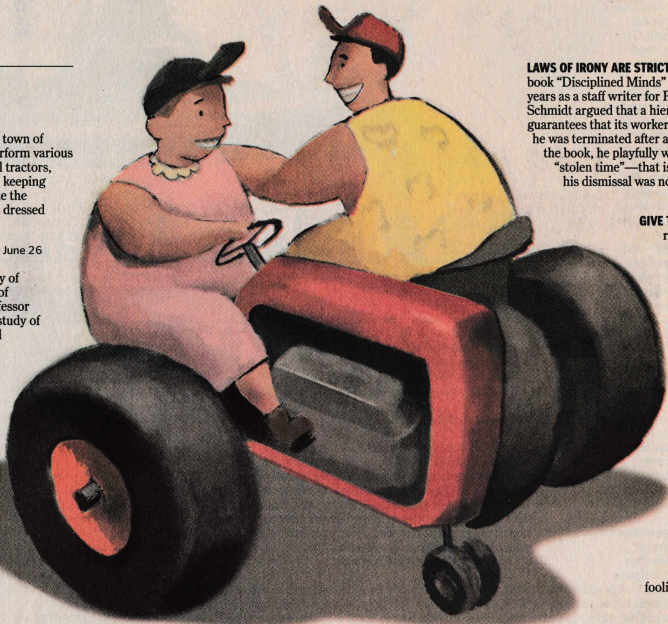
ROGER CLEMENS'S NEXT CAREER: In the finals of the Kemijarvi international snowball championship in Finland, Japan's ultra-serious Seibotu Raiders easily beat a more-relaxed European team. Under the rules, the teams start with seven players per side and 270 snowballs each on a field about the size of a tennis court, with some barriers for cover; a direct hit eliminates a player. The first team to seize the opponent's flag wins.

—National Post (Toronto), April 11

It's Just Criminal

WORST SHORT-TERM MEMORY: Mark Vincent Hinkley, 37, a member of a federal grand jury that had handed up secret indictments in a narcotics case, was arrested the following day after he visited an accused drug dealer and allegedly attempted to sell him information about the indictments for \$50,000. Hinkley, who was charged with

Chuck Shepherd's weekly feature, "News of the Weird," appears in the Washington City Paper and elsewhere around the country.



soliciting a bribe, had apparently forgotten a key part of the testimony he had just heard: that the government had wiretapped the dealer's office. According to prosecutors, Hinkley's proposition was recorded in full.

—Denver Rocky Mountain News, Aug. 2

MOST HAPLESS: T'Chacka Mshinda Thorpe, 25, was arrested in Lynchburg, Va., and charged with possession of cocaine after a brief chase, which ended abruptly when Thorpe tripped on the edge of his stylishly low-hanging baggy pants, fell and broke his leg.

—Richmond Times-Dispatch, May 14

THE CLASSIC MIDDLE NAME (VOL. 5. OF OUR

ANNUAL UPDATE): Charged with murder in 2000: Louis Wayne Watters Jr. (Texas), Steven Wayne Bowman (South Carolina), Aryan Wayne Duntley (California), Robert Wayne Rotramel (Oklahoma), Bryan Wayne Padid (Arizona), Jeffrey Wayne Peck (Oklahoma), Michael Wayne Henry (Texas).

Committed suicide in custody after being indicted for murder: Kenny Wayne Lockwood (Texas).

Sentenced to die for murder: Robert Wayne Harris (Texas).

Sentenced to 50 years for murder: Christopher Wayne Gregory (Texas).

Appeal of murder conviction denied: Randall Wayne Stevens (Illinois). Embroiled in marital estate fight: murderer Scott Wayne Blystone (contesting from death row at the State Correctional Institution in Waynesburg, Pa.).

—(Watters) Corpus Christi Caller-Times, June 16; (Bowman) Augusta Chronicle, Oct. 31; (Duntley) San Diego Union-Tribune, Sept. 2; (Rotramel) Daily Oklahoman, Aug. 22; (Padid) Associated Press, Nov. 16; (Leaf) Daily Oklahoman, Nov. 1; (Henry) Associated Press, Oct. 20; (Lockwood) San Antonio Express-News, Oct. 16; (Harris) Dallas Morning News, Sept. 30; (Gregory) Associated Press, July 26; (Stevens) Chicago Daily Law Bulletin, Aug. 8; (Blystone) Associated Press, Oct. 15



The Highest Levels Of Professionalism

HIS MIND IS WORKING OVERTIME: Disabled police officer Charles Peck, 55, asked the Springfield, Mass., city council for higher benefits in connection with the 1982 squad car crash that ended his career.

Peck's injuries were so severe that he was declared dead at the scene, only to be resuscitated at the hospital. In his latest petition, the officer requested benefits equal to his full salary—an amount usually available only to surviving spouses of deceased officers. Peck asserted that, since he had been legally dead, he has actually survived himself and thus deserved full benefits. The city council approved the bill, but Springfield Mayor Michael J. Albano refused to sign the legislation.

—Associated Press, Feb. 11

NOT EXACTLY LEGAL EAGLES II: Robert Jones's legal theory in his product liability lawsuit against the makers of Liquid Fire drain cleaner (which burned his legs badly in a spill) was not that the container was unsafe—but rather that the container looked unsafe. Thus, Jones decided to transfer the Liquid Fire into his own container, which rapidly disintegrated.

—Atlanta Journal-Constitution, June 15

LAW OF IRONY ARE STRICTLY ENFORCED: Just after publication of his book "Disciplined Minds" in May, Jeff Schmidt was fired after 19 years as a staff writer for Physics Today magazine. In his book, Schmidt argued that a hierarchical organization's structure almost guarantees that its workers cannot devote their full energy to the job; he was terminated after a supervisor learned that in his forward to the book, he playfully wrote that he had completed it partly on "stolen time"—that is, during office hours. His employers said his dismissal was not related to what he wrote in the book.

—Chronicle of Higher Education, June 2

GIVE THEM CREDIT FOR TRYING: Dutch researchers, based on a cost-benefit analysis, advocated in a British journal that health officials in the Netherlands should consider dispensing Viagra for free to sufferers of erectile dysfunction. According to the researchers' Quality-Adjusted Life Year measure, Viagra was more cost-effective than other "interventions" that the Dutch health service now funds, including kidney transplants and breast cancer screening.

—British Medical Journal, April 29

NOT EXACTLY LEGAL EAGLES II: Florida lawyer Philip G. Butler, who had defended himself (unsuccessfully) at his bribery trial, argued to the state's 4th District Court of Appeals that his conviction should be overturned because, as a client, he had been inadequately informed by his lawyer that representing himself at trial was foolish. (He lost the appeal, also.)

—Miami Daily Business Review, Sept. 7

Gov'mint at Work

DEMAND-SIDE REGULATION: A bill introduced by a Vermont lawmaker sought to penalize any adult who chooses not to own a gun, requiring the scofflaw to register with the state and pay a \$500 fine for the privilege of being unarmed. Also, a bill introduced in the Mississippi legislature sought to curb public nudity at strip clubs by making it illegal for male dancers to have erections while performing. Neither bill passed.

—Boston Globe, Feb. 1; Associated Press, Jan. 27, July 13

THE END OF POLITICS: In March, British Columbia Supreme Court Judge Glen Parrett overturned Mike Frazier's victory in the race for mayor of the small village of McBride. In a 28-page decision, the judge ruled that Frazier was not entitled to the office because he had made knowingly false statements about his opponent's position on a tax issue.

—Globe and Mail, March 9

Art and Artifice

HOW TO TELL IF YOU HAVE TOO MUCH MONEY: Art

patrons bought up Christie's entire collection of 60 paintings created by artists that also happen to be elephants, including works by Sao (a former log hauler in Thailand's timber industry), whose style was likened by Yale art historian Mia Fineman to the work of Paul Gauguin for its "broad, gentle, curvy brush strokes" and "a depth and maturity that remains unrivaled in the elephant art world." Fineman says there are three distinct regional styles of Thai elephant art: northern ("lyrical and expressive"), central ("dark, cooler" colors in "broad, vigorous strokes") and southern ("saturated tertiary colors").

—Boston Globe, March 19

I DANCE ON YOUR GRAVE: City officials in Oswiecim, Poland, (a k a Auschwitz) gave a group of investors permission to open a disco on the spot of a World War II-era tannery that "employed" nearby concentration camp workers and stored the hair of gas chamber victims. And Lithuanian entrepreneur Vilumias Malinauskas announced his intention to open "Stalin's World." The tourist attraction near Gruta, Lithuania, will tell the story of the 200,000 people sent to Siberian labor camps during the Soviet dictator's reign. (Under the developer's plan, visitors will enter the theme park in cattle cars and eat oat gruel and fish broth, just as the prisoners did.)

—Associated Press, Aug. 17; Wall Street Journal, July 24, and the Scotsman (Edinburgh), July 25

WHAT CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS? Astrologer Jacqueline Stallone (mother of actor Sly) said in a pre-Election Day interview that her dogs—a pair of miniature pinschers—had told her telepathically that George W. Bush would win the presidency by 200 votes.

—Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Nov. 7



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